

Michael J. Sonnenfeld
3531 Mount Zion Road
Upperco, Maryland 21155

March 8, 2022

Re: SB 538 Michael Sonnenfeld: Unfavorable Written Testimony

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am writing about SB 538 / HB 673, which define “special events and occasions” as agritourism for farms that “generate income from an agricultural activity.” This bill is being referred to as the “wedding bill,” as it would allow any farm that generates any revenue from agriculture, renting a field to a farmer to make hay for example, to also rent facilities for special events like weddings and call those events “agritourism.”

I think Maryland has a great opportunity to promote agritourism to support our agricultural economy, but I do not think that allowing commercial event venues unrelated to agriculture in an agricultural or rural conservation zone is a good idea.

I think there is a big difference between events that support an active farm business, for example a vineyard that holds occasional bluegrass concerts to bring customers to the property to whom they can sell wine, and events hosted by a commercial venue that are unrelated to agriculture but are held on a property that is zoned for agricultural and residential use. A commercial event venue that regularly hosts weddings in a rural setting will bring lots of traffic and late-night noise that otherwise would be required to be located in areas zoned for commercial use.

Property owners that put in place minimal agricultural activity should not be encouraged or authorized by this legislation to avoid the land use guidelines and restrictions that otherwise relate to their property under the respective County zoning or under the terms of an agricultural or conservation easement that relates to their property.

I am particularly concerned that owners of conserved farms would attempt to use this bill’s expanded definition of agritourism to argue that they should be allowed to host commercial events and weddings unrelated to agriculture on conserved farms. Most agricultural and conservation easements specifically prohibit the property owner from commercial activities unrelated to agriculture. The State of Maryland and most Counties in Maryland have invested a significant amount of time and money to purchase agricultural and conservation easements on properties in order to keep a critical mass of land devoted to agriculture in support of Maryland's important agricultural economy and to preserve open space and maintain the rural character of our communities.

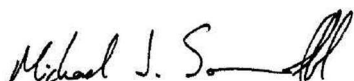
I think SB 538 and HB 673’s characterization of a commercial event venue as agritourism could undermine the significant work the State and Counties have done to preserve agriculture, maintain open space and support our rural communities and our rural legacy.

Accordingly, I request that you vote against adoption of this bill, and if the bill is likely to be adopted, I would respectfully request that you seek to have a clarifying clause added to the bill to the effect of:

(c) NOTHING IN THIS BILL SHALL BE INTERPRETED TO ALLOW COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES ON PROPERTIES IF THOSE ACTIVITIES WOULD OTHERWISE BE PROHIBITED BY THE TERMS OF AN AGRICULTURAL OR CONSERVATION EASEMENT ON THE PROPERTY.

I live on a conserved farm in Baltimore County Maryland in the midst of a wonderful area of contiguous protected agricultural and conserved properties, and my wife and I have purchased and protected land neighboring our farm.

Thanks in advance.



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